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## Views

# Interpersonal motivations in adolescent rumination

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**Abstract**

In the decades since Nolen-Hoeksema's (1991) original work on response styles, research on rumination has flourished within psychological science. This literature often emphasizes the association of impaired problem-solving with rumination. Spikes in the prevalence of rumination coincide with the entry into adolescence, as youth become increasingly sensitive to social feedback and interpersonal relationships. This article introduces the idea that rumination represents a socially reinforced process in adolescent girls, who are particularly likely to engage in rumination and to find interpersonal stress aversive. In the event that relationships evoke distress, girls may be able to *generate* solutions through ruminative coping; however, they are unwilling to *accept and enact* these solutions when these solutions have the potential to be further socially disruptive. Although ruminative inaction may have grave consequences for the moods of youth, it maintains an interpersonal harmony that some youth may prioritize and, in the process, avoids changing a social milieu, angering or displeasing others, or generating unwanted social controversy or conflict. This serves as reinforcement for ruminative coping, creating the risk that rumination will become an entrenched habit with the potential to further erode mood over time.

**Keywords:** rumination; gender; depression; adolescence; internalizing

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The psychological salience of rumination represents one of the most important research findings within clinical science. Rumination – or the tendency to cope by thinking repetitively and passively about the experience, causes, and consequences of distress – has been copiously linked with the onset, maintenance, and exacerbation of low mood (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Three decades of scholarship have further clarified that rumination is associated with disorders beyond depression (McLaughlin et al., 2014; McLaughlin & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2007); comprises a benign form of self-reflection as well as more problematic brooding (Treynor et al., 2003); and may encompass emotional states other than sadness (including both anger and, somewhat counterintuitively, positive emotions; Kelley et al., 2021; Li et al., 2017).

From its inception, rumination has been entangled with gender[1]. Women are particularly prone to ruminate – and this tendency, is believed to explain, at least in part, well-documented gender disparities in depression (Hyde et al., 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). Like depression, rumination itself rises in girls at puberty and early adolescence (Hankin et al., 2025; Mendle et al., 2020). It is so ubiquitous that adolescent girls ruminate not just on their own, but within their conversations and relationships with each other – a phenomenon which both strengthens their interpersonal connection and worsens their mood over time (Rose, 2021; Stone & Gibb, 2015).

But *why* do adolescent girls ruminate? By definition, rumination is a passive and inactive approach to distress. Upsetting circumstances – even ones which are potentially easy to resolve – do not change simply because of the act of dwelling about them. Within the research literature, the passivity of rumination has often been attributed to impaired problem solving capacities (Koster et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 1999; Watkins & Roberts, 2020). A host of converging evidence supports that people who ruminate tend to show depleted cognitive control, inhibition, and task switching, as well as accompanying neural correlates of these difficulties (Beckwé et al., 2014; Dickson et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Whitmer & Gotlib, 2013; Yang et al., 2017). Recurrent rumination may even worsen executive functioning over time, with higher rumination prospectively linked with reduced attentional switching in adolescents (Connolly et al., 2014).

A basic tenet of operant conditioning is that any behavior, no matter how seemingly disadvantageous, must be reinforced in some way for it to be repeated. In the case of rumination, there is a plausible interpersonal component that explains habitual rumination in the face of distress, particularly for adolescent girls. While the literature is surprisingly sparse about the content of adolescent ruminations, interpersonal stressors (e.g., disagreements with friends, romantic partners, and family; friendship instability; perceived lack of closeness and support; perceived social judgment or negative evaluation) are common contributors to adolescent

[1]Much of the research reported in this manuscript compares men and women; boys and girls; or males and females; this manuscript reports study results in terms of the comparisons that were conducted in those studies, while simultaneously recognizing that the field now typically assesses a broad range of gender identity.

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distress (Chan & Poulin, 2009; Conley & Rudolph, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2016; Rudolph, 2002) and would be expected to comprise a significant portion of adolescent ruminative content. In support of this, longitudinal studies show adolescents who report high peer stress are particularly likely to develop ruminative brooding over time (Shaw et al., 2024).

Interpersonal stress is frequently a predicament for adolescent girls, who tend to heavily value relationships. They hold greater expectations for intimacy, closeness, and support in their relationships than boys (Hall, 2011; Rudolph & Dodson, 2022) and they experience a heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, the opinions of others, and need for belongingness during this life stage (Somerville, 2013). These values are also socialized and learned; from an early age, girls report perceiving pressure to conform to traditional gender roles – including being kind, caring, well-behaved, not disruptive, investing in relationships, and prioritizing the needs and feelings of others above their own (Cook et al., 2019; Egan & Perry, 2001; Ellemers, 2018). Girls are further vulnerable to self-esteem contingencies, and prone to connect their self-worth to the approval of others (Burwell & Shirk, 2006).

Rumination supports these gendered roles and expectations; while rumination may take a toll on a ruminator's own psychological health, it is definitionally a non-disruptive act that upholds status quo. Without discounting the established cognitive and attentional difficulties that prolong and maintain ruminative states, an underexplored contributor to rumination may be an approach to problem solving that prioritizes interpersonal harmony. This would mean that viable options to ameliorate distress may be intentionally discarded if they hold the capacity to displease others, disrupt relationships, change a social milieu, or generate unwanted social attention or conflict. Consequently, it may not be that girls who ruminate to cope with interpersonal stress cannot generate resolutions to these situations as much as they do not wish to accept and enact resolutions that could catalyze subsequent interpersonal complexity or discord. Indeed, these actions may even go unrecognized as solutions during ruminative coping, because their disadvantages are perceived as too significant or threatening to a sense of self that may be tethered to gender roles centered on kindness and pleasing others.

Adolescent social worlds can be complicated, with social norm violations met with rejection, anger, or derogation (Meimoun et al., 2025; van Kleef et al., 2015). Given the intricacies of their social environments, adolescent girls' assessment of the value of social harmony may, in fact, be realistic and accurate. Rather than a straightforward matter of impaired problem solving, rumination could emerge as a strategic, perceptive choice to preserve the likelihood of social success. Interpersonal reinforcement for rumination may be further amplified by past experiences: adolescents who have attempted to address interpersonal problems less passively in the past may have seen their efforts go awry, as it takes time, practice, and (in some conversations) emotion regulation for effective communication. Even if one adolescent is a strong communicator, efforts to negotiate interpersonal stressors directly may be rebuffed or complicated by peers whose skills in this area are still developing.

The interpersonal reinforcement of rumination seems especially apt for adolescent girls, who receive gendered socialization messages that align with these benefits; are in the midst of a developmental stage during which social connection and evaluative concerns are heightened; and who are still testing and considering ways to be agentic in their worlds. Indeed, Nolen-Hoeksema's original theorizing on the gender disparity in depression invoked three factors relevant to the ideas discussed here: dependence on others for self-esteem, increased expectations to conform to rigid social roles, and ruminative coping (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Yet it should be noted that interpersonal reinforcement for rumination is not necessarily limited nor exclusive to adolescent girls. Anyone of any age or gender might be similarly susceptible, given a preference – or, potentially, cultural emphasis – for interpersonal harmony. Certainly, the conceptualization presented above draws heavily on gender roles in primarily Western, individualistic societies. It is easy to speculate that different patterns might emerge in other cultures, especially those that diverge in either their gendered socialization or in their social emphases more broadly. One possibility, for example, might be that that the overall connection between interpersonal harmony and rumination might be stronger in collectivist cultures, which prioritize group needs and goals over individual ones, and encourage the suppression of negative emotions for the sake of community (Butler et al., 2007; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). However, in these cultures, reinforcement for rumination might not be constrained to women and girls or heavily skewed towards one gender. In support of this, aspects of rumination have been shown to vary across cultures, with European Americans more likely to link rumination with self-doubt than East Asians (Choi & Miyamoto, 2023) and some evidence suggesting that, overall, brooding may be more prevalent in collectivist cultures (Chang et al., 2010; Kwon et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022).

It should be emphasized that this conceptualization of rumination is not meant to advocate for rumination as an optimal response to distress; but rather to broaden the literature and explain its emergence in a population known to be vulnerable. Indeed, it is likely that prioritizing interpersonal harmony is a tactic that both holds advantages for ruminators and simultaneously leaves them feeling powerless, as the antecedents for their distress often remain unchanged and their perspectives unheard. It is also the case that prioritizing social harmony does not necessarily mean that rumination succeeds in maintaining it. Dwelling over a social situation for days builds distress, which might culminate in awkwardness, excessive reassurance seeking, negatively focused talk, or snappishness within the very relationships someone hoped to preserve. This possibility aligns with research suggesting that rumination may be one contributor to stress generation in depression (Flynn et al., 2010) – as well as with the idea that at least some of the reinforcement for rumination draws on societal messaging dispersed across a population while the ability to inhibit emotional reactivity will differ among individuals.

Although both rise in adolescence for girls, it should be clarified that solitary rumination (as described here) differs from co-rumination – or the tendency for individuals to talk repetitively about problems and negative emotions in their conversations with each other (Felton et al., 2019; Rose, 2002, 2021). Co-rumination and rumination are not mutually exclusive, with studies suggesting that co-rumination with a peer fosters ongoing solitary rumination, perhaps because it is difficult to engage from repetitive negative thinking once it begins (Felton et al., 2019; Stone & Gibb, 2015). Yet the converse does not seem to be true: rumination does not longitudinally increase co-rumination (Felton et al., 2019). A key difference between the two is that co-rumination is fundamentally a joint and shared experience versus an isolative one. Particularly relevant for the ideas outlined here is that interpersonal reinforcements for co-rumination have been

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previously identified and discussed in the literature. These are generally oriented towards social connection, such as deeper friendships, feelings of closeness, and social support (Ames-Sikora et al., 2017; Felton et al., 2019; Rose, 2021), which may actually suppress depressive symptoms – or at least counter-balance the erosion of mood linked with perseverative brooding. There are obvious societal advantages to traits such as kindness and valuing relationships; personal benefits to receiving social support; and realistic concerns about the casual interpretation that such traits are harmful to mental health. In fact, careful analysis of co-rumination and depressive symptoms longitudinally suggests that these associations occur primarily at the between-person level; on average, youth who co-ruminate frequently show greater symptoms of depression and worsening symptoms over time than youth who co-ruminate less frequently. Within-person, however, co-rumination is associated with improvements in friendship quality over time but not decrements in mood – a situation which means co-rumination may hold "more benefits than costs" (Bernasco et al., 2025).

The ways in which depressive rumination could be reinforced is, of course, not absent from the research literature. Congruent with the conceptualization outlined here, Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues, for example, speculate that ruminative inaction allows people to avoid aversive situations (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Similarly, evolutionary psychologists have described rumination as an evolved adaption designed to solve the types of complex problems, including social dilemmas, that could threaten fitness and survival (Andrews & Thomson, 2009; Bartoskova et al., 2018). Yet neither of these explanations offers developmental clarity on the precise circumstances of adolescence that encourage ruminative coping. Indeed, much of the empirical literature on rumination and problem solving is not just centered on adult participants, but reflects adult situations (e.g., workplace inequities, layoffs, finances, the struggle of balancing work and family) that likely do not align with the issues that many adolescents themselves would define as their own problems (Jones et al., 2017; Junker et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2025).

Identifying the content of adolescent rumination stands as one of the most needed undertakings required to test the ideas proposed here. Although it seems plausible that interpersonal concerns contribute to rumination in youth, this – surprisingly – has neither been studied nor established in the research literature. In addition to youth self-reports of ruminative content, qualitative studies might offer value in verifying the topics that youth dwell on, as well as their reasons for not pursuing active solutions to problems about which they ruminate. A second needed area of research would be clarifying if there are indeed interpersonal sequelae of rumination. What do relationships and interpersonal interactions look like in the aftermath of ruminating about them? A particularly intriguing option would be to consider dyadic research – for example, among youth and a friend whom they nominate as someone they frequently think about – and to use either dyadic daily diary techniques (e.g., Ong et al., 2022) or dyadic ecological momentary assessment (e.g., Rogers et al., 2018). Dyadic analyses could help clarify whether the target of rumination is aware of the ruminator's distress as well as capture antecedents and sequelae of interpersonally evoked rumination.

Eliminating interpersonal reinforcement for rumination would be an exigent task. It could be done at an individual level, within evidence-based interventions that encourage the monitoring of emotional states and how they are aligned with behaviors. Yet to eliminate this reinforcement fully would take a societal sea change of significant magnitude. It would necessitate a close, and likely uncomfortable, examination of emotion socialization, including the flexibility and parameters surrounding our assumptions of who is allowed to express emotion, which emotions, and in what circumstances. It would require thoughtfulness about the execution and hidden messaging within media, various well-intentioned socioemotional educational initiatives (e.g, "kindness walls" and the students featured on them), and our own, adult reactions to adolescent experiences and perceived problems. Such efforts are not impossible; indeed, research suggests that stereotyped gender roles (such as those invoked here) have actually been more tractable for girls and femininity than boys and masculinity (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Mulvey & Killen, 2015); consequently, some of this reinforcement may even dwindle or become less gendered, on its own, as socialization slowly changes. Yet it seems likely that the greatest application of this conceptualization may be within the empirical literature, as psychological scientists grapple with how to expand and conceptualize the next generation of rumination research.

Finally, accruing reinforcement for rumination during adolescence may be salient for future developmental trajectories. This reinforcement might contribute to the formation of rumination as a habit, resulting in ongoing decrements in cognition that make it harder to disengage from perseverative negative thoughts and longer term vulnerability for depression across the lifespan (van Vugt et al., 2018; Watkins & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2014). It is also the case that certain adolescents, because of their early life circumstances, temperament, and other individual differences, may be particularly prone to finding ruminative inaction reinforcing (Shaw et al., 2019). As psychological scientists continue to muddle through the mysteries of rumination, integrating these interpersonal benefits of rumination into the literature may help us understand the origins, persistence, and exacerbation of this complex process.

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